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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS ISSUES IN CENTRAL HIGHLANDS PROVINCE OF DAK LAK

REF: HCMC 1140

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Officials in the Central Highlands province of Dak Lak are keeping a tight lid on religious activities, particularly in the Protestant community. According to GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam, only 4,300 of 125,000 believers worship in "official" churches; the rest worship at home. The tough attitude of local authorities may be a result of a "Dega" separatist presence within the house church movement. The harder line in Dak Lak is in contrast with neighboring Gia Lai Province where Catholic and Protestant leaders have been able to build some cooperative ties with authorities. Religious leaders in Dak Lak welcome the new ordinance on religion but are skeptical about local implementation. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) From November 15-17, HCMC PolOff and EconOff and Embassy Pol/C visited Buon Ma Thuot, the capital of the Central Highlands Province of Dak Lak. Along with neighboring Gia Lai Province, which we visited in September (reftel), Dak Lak was a center of ethnic minority unrest in 2004 and 2001. A key focus of the visit was religious freedom. The local government showed little creativity on economic issues, but appeared to be implementing at least some GVN social and education initiatives for ethnic minorities. We will report more on economic and social development issues in Dak Lak septel.

Buddhists: Pacified

¶3. (U) Thich Giac Dung, Thich Chau Quang and other members of the provincial board of the GVN-recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) told us that their operations in Dak Lak were "stable and normal." Local media and provincial external relations officials also attended this meeting. The monks said that there are 120,000 Buddhists in the province, up from 85,000 in 1975, almost all of whom are ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh.) (Over the past 30 years the population of Dak Lak has increased from 350,000 to 1.7 million.) The VBS in Dak Lak operates 124 pagodas, up from 80 in 1975. Prior to 1975 the Buddhist community ran a school that was "voluntarily donated" to the GVN. The Sangha has no expectation of its return.

¶4. (U) The VBS officials said that their organization is involved in charitable activities in the province. Traditionally, the VBS focused on poverty alleviation and assistance to the province's four homes for victims of leprosy. Recently, under the guidance of the GVN's Fatherland Front, the VBS has begun to focus on assisting the "two thousand victims" of Agent Orange in the province. The VBS leaders called on the USG to assist the province in this area.

SECV: Under Pressure

¶5. (SBU) Pastors Y Ta Hmok, Y Ky Eban and Huynh Kim Thoa (all strictly protest), Chairmen of Dak Lak chapter of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV), described stringent restrictions on their 125,000-member community, particularly following ethnic minority unrest in the Central Highlands in April 2004. The Protestant community in Dak Lak is overwhelmingly ethnic minority -- only seven to eight thousand are majority Kinh.

¶6. (SBU) The SECV leaders said that they need 300 churches to serve their community. They said that there were other Protestant denominations operating in the area, including Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons and groups affiliated with the Vietnam Evangelical Foundation, an umbrella organization for the country's house church movement. In 2001, following GVN recognition of the SECV, the Dak Lak pastors submitted to provincial authorities a list of 71 churches for recognition. Two were immediately approved and another three were approved in January 2004. One of these five churches is located in Dak Nong, which was split from the province of Dak Lak early this year. The remaining four churches serve 4,300 persons. The pastors said that all other Protestants worship at home in small family units. The SECV has petitioned the provincial Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) to allow local communities to gather in larger groups for Christmas, but has not yet been given a reply. According to Pastor Huynh, prior to April 2004, police tolerated gatherings of up to 300 worshipers at a time in some districts in the province.

¶7. (SBU) The Pastors confirmed the presence of a "Dega Protestant" church movement in the province, but would not elaborate further. They said that some of the April 2004 protestors were calling for

religious freedom but many had been lured into participating by protest organizers (NFI) who promised land and GVN aid would result. Others were told that they would be resettled in the United States.

¶18. (SBU) The SECV pastors were skeptical about the impact of the new Ordinance on Religion on SECV activities in the province, including the recognition of new churches. They said that the new legal framework could improve conditions for recognized churches, if implemented according to the letter of the law. Local government is the problem, however. The pastors told us that "what we hear from the center is good, but the reality on the ground is different."

¶19. (SBU) A leader of the SECV in neighboring Gia Lai Province told us that there is greater tension and distrust between the SECV and local authorities in Dak Lak than in Gia Lai. He explained that both sides -- the local SECV and Dak Lak provincial authorities -- are to blame. He said that Dak Lak officials have long espoused a hardline approach toward ethnic minorities. The post-1975 "Dega" separatist movement had its origins in Dak Lak Province, and the SECV there includes pastors and laymen linked to the "Dega" movement. While the church in Gia Lai sticks to religious issues, the Dak Lak SECV is politicized as well as both internally divided and disorganized, Kim said.

Catholic Church: Ready to Test the New Ordinance

¶10. (SBU) Bishop Nguyen Tich Duc and Father Tran Van Phuc, Chief of Staff of the Dak Lak Diocese (both strictly protect), told us that conditions for the Catholic Church had improved, but they hoped for faster and more comprehensive improvement. The diocese, which covers Dak Lak and Dak Nong Provinces as well as four districts of neighboring Binh Phuoc Province, has over 303,000 members. Of these, nearly 55,000 are ethnic minority. There were roughly 67,500 registered Catholics in the province in 1975. In Dak Lak Province alone, the Catholic Church records approximately 189,000 believers, 32,000 of them ethnic minority.

¶11. (SBU) The diocese has an acute shortage of priests. There are only 70 active registered priests in the diocese -- 38 in Dak Lak -- but 105 active churches. In one extreme case, one priest serves 24,000 worshipers in his parish. A number of other parish priests each serve 15,000 to 20,000 parishioners. There has been little progress in returning the church property confiscated after 1975, although the Bishop was hopeful that the diocese would soon receive a small building that the local government "borrowed" for a five-year term over twenty years ago.

¶12. (SBU) Bishop Duc declined to comment on unrest in the Central Highlands, but said that no Catholics were involved in the protests. Duc said that he appreciated recent central government initiatives to improve the welfare of ethnic minorities in the province, but cautioned that he would have to wait and see what really happens on the ground. He was cautiously optimistic about the impact of the new religious ordinance on Church operations in the province.

¶13. (SBU) Duc indicated that he planned to test the ordinance by ordaining up to 21 new priests without prior approval of the authorities. The diocese also has 31 students training at the Nha Trang seminary.

Provincial CRA: "No Unrecognized Churches in Dak Lak"

¶14. (SBU) In a meeting that included critiques of USG human rights policy, the Vietnam Human Rights Act and demands that the USG assume responsibility for Agent Orange war-legacy issues, Vo Thi Li, Head of the provincial Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), said that the Dak Lak government fully protected religious freedom. Her description of the Buddhists and Catholics largely tracked what the communities' religious leaders told us. But she claimed her statistics show 3,000 Protestants in the province, "although the SECV might have a larger number." The CRA chief also maintained that there are no unrecognized churches or a house church movement in the province.

¶15. (SBU) Li said that over the past month she had conducted two separate briefings on the religious ordinance based on materials that the central-level CRA provided. One briefing was for 200 local officials, who would train provincial officers down to the village level. The second meeting was for 120 provincial religious leaders. The Dak Lak CRA chief told us that she would "try to implement what is indicated by the ordinance." She did not anticipate major changes in the CRA's procedure or practice under the new legal framework.

Comment

¶16. (SBU) The Dak Lak CRA was the least encouraging of any we have met thus far in southern Vietnam. Officials in the Central Highlands fear the "Dega" separatists in the Protestant community; the entire community is affected as a result. In Gia Lai, the

SECV has a working relationship with somewhat more flexible provincial officials. In Dak Lak there is limited contact and no constructive dialogue.

WINNICK